

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation's philosophy is 'Growing, Harvesting, Preparing, Sharing', and each of those elements is equally important. One of the aims of the Foundation is to help children experience the variety and deliciousness of fresh, seasonally grown produce. This generally means that children will encounter new tastes, new vegetables and new cooking styles. For some children, this will be an exciting adventure, but others will find it very challenging.

Children may have limited diets for many reasons, for example health or cultural reasons, or parental preference. Emotions influence diet – for example, feelings of anxiety or fearfulness can reduce children's appetites or make them feel like they have upset tummies, leading to food refusal. Adults, too, can find food refusal challenging, particularly if they feel that carefully tended garden produce is 'going to waste'. As adults we need to expect that food refusal will occur and anticipate how to manage the situation.

## Principles and context

It can be tricky to walk the path between respecting the bodily autonomy of students and encouraging them to stretch their boundaries and explore new things. Here are some principles that we hope will help you determine the approach that will work for you and your students.

- Repeat exposure does help. Children may need to try a new food 10–20 times in a neutral context before they are comfortable with it.
- No one will be hungry or have missed a meal if they refuse to taste. The Foundation was not set up as a meal program (although some schools do run classes that way). The intention is that students have tastes of food they have prepared together. The size of a taste can vary but is usually about a couple of tablespoons.
- Not every dish must be eaten by all students. If a student can't eat one dish, they will usually be able to taste the other items on that session's menu.
- Sweet dessert-style foods should be part of the menu only once or twice a term and should be limited to seasonal fruit-based dishes.
- Kitchen classes should be regularly timetabled classes and students should be expected to attend.
- A positive environment and adult role modelling by all teachers, specialists and volunteers are important aspects of food acceptance.

## Having 'rules'

Ultimately, you can't force or require a child to eat something and research suggests that foods that are eaten under pressure or to obtain a reward remain stigmatised foods. If you feel your students benefit from the structure of rules in your kitchen garden classes, we recommend a gentle and flexible approach. It goes without saying that students with allergies and other dietary requirements such as vegetarians should be exempt where necessary. Two 'rules' that have worked for other schools are the 'teaspoon rule' and the 'seasoning rule'. These are described here.



### *The 'teaspoon rule'*

All students must *taste* the food that is prepared in class. Watching other children react badly to a new or disliked food can be disruptive to others, so feel free to take away the audience. You could make it clear that the child has to taste the food but he or she doesn't have to do it front of everyone.



## Some strategies

**Repetition and practice.** We don't just eat foods that we like – we come to like foods that we try regularly. Keep some menu items consistent. There should always be a leafy salad, but perhaps you might make a pasta dish or a frittata each session, adapting it to what's in the garden. This can make planning out a term's menu much easier, too.

**Prepare a variety of dishes.** Some students have sensory issues around food. Try to plan for a variety of textures as well as a variety of tastes in each menu. Where possible, allow the students to review the recipes before the kitchen class, for example, by providing them to class teachers. They can be a great source for spelling words or new verbs and adjectives!

**Don't eat and cook in the same groups.** Mixing up the groups when it's time to sit down and eat can assist children to try new things because they are sitting with peers who made the unfamiliar dishes.

**Kitchen adventures.** Kitchen activities and experiments can include tasting food as part of a scientific investigation, for example purple climbing beans turn green when they are cooked. Do they taste the same as beans that were green on the plant?

**We are allowed not to like things.** It's not compulsory to enjoy all foods, although we hope that's what happens! If a student is prepared to taste things, but expresses distaste, that is reasonable. Negative feelings and opinions, if expressed reasonably, should be acknowledged and need not derail the class experience.

**Exploit the rich language opportunities.** Sitting around the table provides many opportunities to prompt conversation beyond 'yuck' or 'I just don't like it'. What is it about the dish that they doesn't like? Is it the texture? The smell? An ingredient? What does it remind them of? (This can be a dangerous question!) What could they do to the recipe to make it something they'd like?

**Make delicious food.** Humans, and children in particular, are hardwired for certain tastes – predominantly sweetness. To make sour, bitter and savoury flavours more appealing and acceptable to children we need to make lovely food. Using quality Australian extra-virgin olive oil, good salt flakes, tasty vinegar and lots of herbs is a huge help.

## What if a child still refuses to try food?

In some cases there will be a deeper food issue that is beyond the scope of what can reasonably be addressed in a kitchen class. You may feel like you're not 'succeeding' if a child repeatedly refuses to eat, but that view is not supported by expert views of how children come to eat 'normally' or 'well'.

It's not as simple as 'Step 1: Sit down. Step 2: Eat' Paediatric psychologist Dr Kay Toomey has identified 25 steps to food acceptance in normally developing children, and 32 in children with additional needs. The process begins with tolerating being in the same room as the food, moving through interacting physically, smelling the food, touching it and finally tasting. You may not realise it, but you're probably already a long way there!

[kitchengardenfoundation.org.au](http://kitchengardenfoundation.org.au)



### The 'seasoning rule'

No one is required to taste food in the dining area, but everyone must taste the dish they are preparing in the *kitchen* to make sure it is seasoned properly and the flavours are balanced. This is an expression of respect for the people who will eat the food and pride in presenting a lovely dish.

